

# Developing Cross-Cultural Awareness: Learning Through the Experiences of Others

*Garold L. Murray and Deborah J. Bollinger*

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*This article offers communicative activities designed to enhance the cross-cultural awareness of Japanese university students whose language levels range from beginner to intermediate. Facilitating the development of cross-cultural awareness of foreign language students who have never lived in another culture or even visited one can be problematic. Although many educators have responded to the challenge with a knowledge-based approach, a recent study suggests a syllabus that emphasizes constructivist, process-oriented tasks would be more effective. In their efforts to implement the latter approach, the authors have devised activities that range from student-generated interviews of a guest speaker and e-mail exchanges with target language speakers to a mini-video ethnography project that focuses on the cross-cultural experiences of others. The article outlines these activities and concludes with a brief evaluation of their effectiveness based on the learners' reactions.*

*Cette article propose des activités communicatives conçues dans le but d'accroître la conscientisation transculturelle d'étudiants universitaires japonais de niveau linguistique débutant et intermédiaire. Il peut s'avérer difficile de faciliter le développement de la conscientisation transculturelle d'étudiants de langue étrangère quand ceux-ci n'ont jamais séjourné parmi une autre culture. Alors que plusieurs enseignants ont tenté de combler cette lacune en adoptant une approche reposant sur les connaissances, une étude récente indique qu'une pédagogie basée sur des tâches constructivistes et orientées sur le processus serait plus efficace. En établissant cette approche, les auteurs ont conçu une gamme d'activités allant d'entrevues créées par les étudiants auprès de conférenciers invités aux échanges par courrier électronique avec des locuteurs de la langue cible en passant par un projet ethnographique à base de vidéo exploitant les expériences transculturelles des autres. L'article décrit ces activités et présente une évaluation succincte de leur efficacité établie à partir des réactions des étudiants.*

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## **Introduction**

Providing students in a foreign language classroom with an understanding of "culture" that goes beyond food and national dress can be a daunting task for any teacher. Fostering the development of cross-cultural awareness can be even more challenging. Indeed, many textbooks on the market tend to limit themselves to the variance in surface manifestations of culture, rather than explore the underlying aspects that give rise to these differences (Stapleton, 1997). Yet it is these features that must be explored if students are to develop their cross-cultural awareness and use this understanding to improve their communicative competence.

In a broad sense cross-cultural awareness has been defined for teachers as "the understanding and appreciation of different values and behaviours as they are experienced in different cultures and through different languages" (Koyama, 1992, p. 5). For the purposes of course development, this notion can be broken down into three components: an understanding of what culture is; how cultures differ in terms of their members' beliefs, values, and behavior; and how these differences influence communication. The task of addressing these issues in the classroom is complicated by the fact that many students have never had an opportunity to live in another culture or even visit a foreign country. Therefore, educators are left to answer the perplexing question of how best to facilitate the development of cross-cultural awareness.

Although many educators take a knowledge-based approach,<sup>1</sup> others have adopted a constructivist-oriented approach that highlights experiential learning. One inquiry compared these instructional approaches within the framework of the same course (Wright, 2000). In his study Wright used the already existing knowledge-based curriculum with a control group, whereas a syllabus emphasizing the constructivist principles of process—learning as an ongoing social activity, and intersubjectivity, that is, adapting learning to students' personal contexts—was designed for the treatment group. Informed primarily by the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Poplin and Stone (1992), the treatment curriculum was based on the view that learning is the creation of meaning that takes place when individuals relate new knowledge to existing knowledge. The results of this study point to the need "to reconsider the paradigm of culture as information and introduce learner-centred activities that arbitrate between student's pre-existing perceptions and the otherness of another culture" (Wright, 2000, p. 337).

Wright (2000) notes that developing a curriculum to support constructivist learning is a challenge. This is not surprising, given that constructivism is an epistemology and not a teaching approach replete with suggested classroom activities. In view of this, we would like to offer several activities that we have found successful in our attempts to ground our teaching prac-

tice in principles of constructivism and learner autonomy, two highly complementary areas of educational thought (Candy, 1991). Although our understanding of learner autonomy is primarily informed by Holec's (1981) model, in the Asian context—more specifically, in a Japanese university setting—we recognize Littlewood's (1999) distinction between two levels of autonomy, which he calls proactive and reactive. Proactive autonomy corresponds to Holec's model, which sees learners responsible for all aspects of their learning, including setting objectives, determining the content and pace, selecting methods and techniques, and evaluating what has been acquired. Reactive autonomy refers to teacher-directed learning situations where "once a goal has been initiated, [it] enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal" (p. 75). Our activities fall into the area of reactive autonomy in that we provide a learning structure that offers our students the security of having clearly defined guidelines as they venture into what is often new terrain. Yet in this structure the students have a degree of choice that offers them a level of control, which enables them to personalize their learning.

### *Activity 1: E-mail Exchanges*

Relatively few of our students have entertained the notion of going abroad or have had much, if any, direct contact with people from other cultures. In order to foster their interest in, and awareness of, other cultures, as well as to motivate them to communicate in English, we encourage students to dialogue through e-mail with their target language peers. This activity has been integrated into a variety of course settings, ranging from basic required courses for freshmen to more advanced level electives. However, before students establish contact with their foreign "friends," it is best to ensure they are accustomed to using computers, English software, and writing English e-mail messages. This can be accomplished by having them carry out several preliminary tasks.

As a first step, students can communicate through e-mail with classmates and the instructor. At the beginning of the semester, students are asked to send a message to a class partner and the instructor about something they did during the break. A do-it-yourself instruction sheet (see Appendix A) is available for students who are unfamiliar with sending e-mail. Following these user-friendly instructions, most students quickly understand they will be able to do this task on their own or with minimal assistance. In order to accommodate various language proficiency levels, they have the option of either doing free writing or a more structured sentence-completion activity. Once they have received the message, they then respond via e-mail asking their partners some questions about what they have written.

Subsequently, students look at the instructor's Web page and interview her via e-mail about her interests, impressions of Japan, and so forth. After

these initial exchanges, students sometimes send e-mail to the instructor about matters related to the class, for example, assignments. Thus in addition to providing opportunities for communication with a native English-speaker (NES) in a structured and nonintimidating format, these activities also serve to open a direct line of communication between the students and the instructor, who is perhaps the first NES with whom many of these students have attempted to communicate.

In preparation for the second phase of the activity, students access an Internet Web site ([www.penpal.net](http://www.penpal.net)) that enables them to choose an e-mail exchange partner from a country they would like to visit. This site also makes it possible for them to select the age and sex of their partner. Once they have made their choice, they write and revise a friendly letter to their would-be partners. A related task involves using the Internet to find information about their partners' countries. Students are asked to look for information about points of interest in the country they have chosen or activities they might engage in were they in fact to visit the country. Subsequently, they share this information with their classmates in an informal presentation. In elective classes, students with more language proficiency access various Internet sites in order to plan trips with detailed itineraries and projected budgets. They subsequently use this information to make oral class presentations. In both instances, the opportunity to personalize this activity by identifying and pursuing their own interests fosters the students' motivation as they begin to visualize themselves going abroad.

Another variation of this activity is used with students in study-abroad orientation classes as they prepare to go to universities in English-speaking countries. In this case they are paired up with NES studying Japanese at those universities. After exchanging letters of introduction, the students determine the frequency of their correspondence. Not only do they enjoy getting to know their partners, but their partners are able to provide pertinent information, allaying their concerns and preparing them for their experience abroad. The opportunity to meet their partners when they arrive in the new culture adds to their enthusiasm and can facilitate their initial adaptation. Upon returning to Japan the following year, many of these students are interviewed as guest speakers in study-abroad classes.

### *Activity 2: Guest Speaker Interviews*

Interviewing "returnees"<sup>2</sup> about their time in another country provides an opportunity for students to hear first hand about the experience of traveling overseas and serves to heighten their awareness of what it is like to live abroad. Like the previous activity, this can be integrated into the curriculum of upper-level elective or required freshmen courses. Students with a beginner proficiency level can be guided to prepare interview questions by using various structured question-writing tasks. (For an example, see Appendix B.)

Even as part of the more highly structured tasks, students can be encouraged to develop their own questions.

Preparing for the interview gives the students an opportunity to begin to identify and express individual interests in other cultures. Here is a sample of the questions the students ask: Why did you decide to go to foreign countries? What are some cultural differences you noticed in Canada? What do you think about Japanese society through an American filter? How did you improve your English ability? How can I make friends from other countries in Japan? These questions reflect their desire to learn about other cultures through the experiences of their peers.

Furthermore, the returnees are fluent enough to be able to communicate in English with relative ease, thereby modeling a level of English proficiency to which other students can aspire. Perhaps more important, they provide students with a first-hand perspective on another culture and share their experiences of dealing with various aspects of cultural adjustment. One noteworthy example was a fellow student who had 15 international penpals, several of whom he had traveled abroad to meet. Although he had disliked studying English in high school, he had been motivated to learn both English and German through corresponding via e-mail with friends in other countries. His proficiency in English and his network of friends around the world provided a clear example of the benefits of e-mail as a medium of cross-cultural exchange.

By talking with returnees, students who have had only a limited contact with other cultures can begin to experience a shift in their own perspective, which transcends the boundaries of a narrowly prescribed world view and facilitates increased cross-cultural awareness. Through the experiences of their peers, students can learn how to improve their language skills, make friends in the target culture, and begin to engage in cross-cultural communication. In addition to offering students opportunities to practice the target language and increase their knowledge of another culture, both e-mail exchanges and guest speaker interviews provide students with a real audience for meaningful communication and exchange. This in turn can serve to build students' confidence and motivate them to improve their English ability, so that when they have opportunities to interact with native English-speakers, they are more prepared and more likely to succeed.

### *Activity 3: Video Project*

The video project is the key component of a cross-cultural communication course for students whose language levels vary from high beginner to intermediate. The students share the general goals of improving their oral English proficiency, increasing their knowledge of other cultures, and learning to communicate more effectively with people from other cultures. The video project provides them with opportunities to work toward these goals.

Midway through the course, after students have examined a number of cross-cultural communication themes, that is, the role of values and beliefs, nonverbal communication, and so forth, the project is introduced. Students are asked to prepare a five- to seven-minute interview with a NES living in Japan or with a nonnative English speaker who has lived in another culture. The interview must be videotaped so it can be presented to the class. The person being interviewed is asked to talk about his or her cross-cultural communication experiences. Students are provided with sample questions to guide them as they develop their own list, that is, What difficulties did you have? How did you solve your problems? What positive experiences did you have? Do you have any amusing stories to tell?

Once the interview has been completed, the students prepare a 15-minute oral presentation for the class. In the presentation they show the video to the class and discuss such points as, who is the person interviewed, why was this person chosen, what is their opinion regarding the interviewee's experience and ideas; and finally, what did they learn in this class that might have helped this person better understand his or her situation? Students are asked to conclude by telling the class what they learned from doing this assignment. This last aspect is important because it adds a self-assessment component that requires the students to reflect on the process as well as their learning in general. The presentation is followed by a question-and-answer period.

To ensure the students' success, the project should be broken down into a series of smaller classroom activities and home assignments. In this way the teacher can provide the necessary support and guidance, offer individual and/or group conferencing, as well as teach the skills the students will need. The challenge for the teacher is to create a structure that offers the students the support they need while enabling them to exercise a degree of control over their work and learning. Here is one way a teacher might accomplish this.

1. Five to six weeks before the presentations, explain the assignment in detail and give students a "Planning Questionnaire," which they can return in a week to 10 days. The questionnaire should include questions such as the following: Whom do you intend to interview? Why have you chosen this person? How long has this person lived in the target culture? Will you need a camera from Audio-Visual Services? What dates?
2. A few days later, provide the students with a calendar of activities leading up to and including the presentations. This is a good time to provide the students with a handout detailing the steps of the class presentation, for example, introduction, video, commentary, conclusion, and discussion. Have the students choose a date for their presentation.

3. On the day the planning questionnaire is due, give students a copy of the peer assessment checklist (see Appendix C). Explain the peer assessment procedures, rating scale, and criteria. Provide clear examples for each number on the 5-point Likert rating scale.<sup>3</sup> Students are asked to develop their own criterion for #10. They are instructed to say something positive and to give the presenters full value. To help students generate a statement, they could be asked to answer either of these questions: What did you especially like about the project? or What did the presenter do well?
4. Have students watch interviews on Japanese or English-language television. In a subsequent class discuss what the interviewer does and what makes a good interview.
5. As a small-group activity, have students brainstorm interview questions. Make a composite list on the blackboard. This is a good opportunity to teach new vocabulary and to address grammar and syntax problems. Use this activity to teach interviewing skills. For example, talk about probe questions and their usefulness in eliciting additional information. As a follow-up activity, they could use role play to practice interviewing. While students work together developing questions, conference with groups and individuals.
6. At least a week before the interviews start, have the students peer edit their lists of interview questions. This is another opportunity to conference with the students. Request that the students provide the interviewee with the list of questions at least four days before the interview.
7. Demonstrate the use of a video camera and explain any camera rental arrangements.
8. On the first day of the class presentations, review the assessment checklist. Have all the students, working in pairs, assess each presentation by completing a copy of the checklist. Later, provide the presenters with copies of the peer and teacher assessments.

In most cases, the class presentations become a showcase for the students' learning and generate genuine interest on the part of their classmates. The videos demonstrate a variety of personal interests and approaches to the assignment. The strength of the project lies in the power of video to enable the students in the classroom to relate the course material to the anecdotes and experiences of the people being interviewed. Moreover, the videos provide the students with multiple perspectives, encouraging them to reflect, question, draw conclusions, and formulate insights. In sum, the video projects and presentations help to both consolidate and extend the learning that has taken place.

## Conclusion

Overall, student response to these activities has been positive. As for the e-mail exchanges, interviews with the guest speakers, and Internet searches to learn about other countries, comments made during informal feedback sessions and on formal course evaluations indicate that students enjoy and see value in these activities. One student actually made the trip he planned and visited several destinations in Canada and the United States. Other students have opted to travel abroad on vacation, join international volunteer projects during school breaks, obtain working holiday visas for Canada or Australia, participate in exchange programs, or work or study abroad after graduation.

Similarly, students are routinely asked on course evaluation forms if they think the instructor should retain or dispense with the video project. Again the response is positive. A typical comment reads, "I learned the differences between Japanese and foreign country about way of thinking, conversational-style, sense of values, and so on." Or "I feel this project was most interesting in this class because we can do interviews to use English and know many communication differences directly." These comments indicate the activities were successful in helping students meet their goals. Hearing and seeing people, often their peers, talk about their experiences enables students to learn vicariously about life and communication in cross-cultural contexts.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For examples of syllabi based on this approach used in tertiary level cross-cultural communication courses offered to Japanese learners, see Rosen (1997) and Stapleton (1997).

<sup>2</sup>*Returnees* is a term commonly used to refer to Japanese who have lived outside Japan and have subsequently returned home.

<sup>3</sup>A danger in using this type of Likert-scale checklist assessment tool is that some well-done assignments might receive low grades because they do not adequately address the criteria, whereas some poorly done assignments might be given high grades because they meet the criteria. To counter this possibility, researchers have suggested creating categories that give more space to subjective marking (Kouritzin & Vizard, 1999). This checklist attempts to account for this phenomenon by including items such as Nos. 2, 4, and 10.

## The Authors

Garold L. Murray teaches in the Foreign Language Centre at Tokai University (Shonan Campus) in Japan. His research interests include learner autonomy, CALL and cross-cultural communication.

Deborah J. Bollinger has taught ESL/EFL in the US, France, and Morocco and is currently a full-time lecturer at Tokai University. Her research interests include cross-cultural communication, CALL, and motivation in SLA.

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## Appendix A

### E-mail Instruction Sheet

#### HOW TO USE E-MAIL

- Turn on the computer (bottom right).
- Click on the **Windows Start Menu** and hold down while you choose Program, then Network, then AIRMAIL.
- Type your **student number**. Press Enter.
- Type your **password**. (You will see \*\*\*\*\* on the screen.) Press Enter.
- Click on the **top left icon** (ink bottle and letter).
- Type the **e-mail address** to which you are sending the message.
- Type the **subject** of your message.
- Send a **copy** of your message to me at: deborahb@keyaki
- Type your **message**. When you finish, click **send** (bottom left).
- To **read e-mail**, double click on the **address**.
- To **reply** to an e-mail message, double click on the address and click on the **2nd icon** from top left (ink bottle and two letters).
- To **delete** an old message, **highlight** it by clicking at the beginning of the message and dragging the mouse down to the end of the message. Then press the **backspace (BS)** or **delete (DEL)** key.
- To **send a copy** of a message to someone else, click on the **3rd icon** from top left.
- To **save** a message on a **disk**, click on the **4th icon** from top left.
- To **print** a message, click on the **printer icon**.
- Click **X** to exit (top right).

## **Appendix B**

### **Sample Guest Speaker Interview**

Put the words below in the correct order. Then add three of your own questions.

1. please / visited / some places / about / you / tell us

- 
2. food / eat / did / what / you / kinds of

- 
3. food / was / favourite / what / your

- 
4. like / your / classes / were / what

- 
5. did / do / class / what / you / after

- 
6. weather / like / was / what / the

- 
7. did / use / kinds of / what / you / transportation

- 
8. weekends / you / how / spend / did

- 
9. at the university / what / difficult / was / most / your life / about

- 
10. miss / did / most / what / you / Japan / about

- 
11. most memorable / in the US / part of / what / your experience / was / the

- 
12. \_\_\_\_\_

- 
13. \_\_\_\_\_

- 
14. \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C**

### **Assessment Checklist**

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#### Assessment Checklist: Video Project/Presentation

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Name:

Student #:

Date:

<i>Assessment Criteria</i>	<i>Rating</i>
1. You spoke loudly and clearly enough for me to hear and understand.	0      1      2      3      4      5
2. You showed that you took an interest in the assignment and attempted to do your best work.	0      1      2      3      4      5
3. You provided background information (i.e., who is this person? why was she/he chosen for the interview? etc.).	0      1      2      3      4      5
4. The content of video was interesting and to the point.	0      1      2      3      4      5
5. You were well prepared for the interview (i.e., were organized and had a well thought-out list of questions for the person being interviewed).	0      1      2      3      4      5
6. You made an effort to analyze the interview (i.e., provide an interesting commentary).	0      1      2      3      4      5
7. You included your own ideas and opinions.	0      1      2      3      4      5
8. You did not read and only glanced at your notes.	0      1      2      3      4      5
9. You concluded by reflecting briefly on your work. In other words, you told the class what you learned from doing the project.	0      1      2      3      4      5
10. (What did you like about the project or presentation?)	0      1      2      3      4      5

TOTAL: \_\_\_\_\_/50

COMMENTS: